

Roll Call, September 13, 2004

The Capitol Visitor Center could become home to more than 50 new statues, including a memorial to the Sept. 11 attacks, under legislation introduced in the House last week. The bill, introduced by Illinois Rep. Mark Kirk (R), calls for the installation of a series of statues honoring "American Heroes."

Under the legislation, Congress would finance a central piece of artwork honoring the crew and passengers of United Flight 93, which crashed in Shanksville, Pa., on Sept. 11, 2001, after being hijacked. It is widely believed that the flight had been intended to crash into the Capitol.

In addition, each state would be allowed to donate one statue, but would not be provided federal funding to do so.

In outlining the legislation, Kirk noted that it would provide the Capitol the ability to put "a new pantheon of heroes on display."

While each state is currently allowed to donate two sculptures to the Capitol's Statuary Hall collection - only Nevada and New Mexico have yet to provide a second statue - Kirk noted that some of those honored are obscure historical figures.

"We have a lot of 18th- and 19th-century heroes, but I would love for the new space to include newly chosen heroes, in all likelihood from the 20th century," Kirk said.

Although states are allowed to exchange their Statuary Hall selection under legislation approved by Congress in 2000 - Kansas is the only state to do so thus far, exchanging a statue of former Gov. George W. Glick (D) for one of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 2003 - Kirk added that his proposal would alleviate pressure to do so.

"In the case of Illinois, we have James Shields ... and Frances Williard," Kirk said, referring to the former Democratic Senator (the only Senator to serve from three states) and the first woman to be honored in the collection, respectively. "We don't want to remove them, but the chance, for example, to have a true new Illinois hero, obviously for example Ronald Reagan from Dixon, Ill., or looking outside the box, Frank Lloyd Wright, would make that new visitor center experience more meaningful."

The extensive selection process for state statues would include the creation of "American Hero Commissions," whose members would be nominated by Congressional lawmakers for each state. In addition, high school students would be asked to nominate potential honorees through written essays.

A list of potential honorees compiled by the Congressional Research Service includes well-known figures such as former Vice President Al Gore and former Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura (I), as well as civil rights advocates, inventors, government officials and military figures.

Although the Architect of the Capitol's office, which is overseeing construction of the 580,000-square-foot visitor center, has set aside some space in the subterranean structure for artwork, it is not clear where the newly proposed statues would be placed.

"Obviously we have to work with them ... so we can make sure this fits the overall plan," Kirk said.

In fact, the Republican lawmaker's proposal marks the third legislative attempt to either procure space or otherwise alter the CVC, although the structure is still more than a year away from completion.

In early July 2003, South Carolina Republicans introduced a bill in the House to name the center after the late Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.). A separate bill, also introduced in 2003, called for a permanent monument honoring the role of minority women in achieving women's suffrage to be placed in the visitor center.

In addition, Congressional officials plan to move some sculptures now housed in the Capitol, including those in the Statuary Hall collection, because of overcrowding. Many statues will likely be located in the CVC's Great Hall, near the structure's entrance.

"Discussions regarding specific artwork and statues that will come into the hall are ongoing," said CVC spokesman Tom Fontana.

An advisory group, made up of both AOC staff and outside curators, is currently being organized, Fontana said. The group will determine which artworks should be relocated and is expected to make a recommendation to the Capitol Preservation Commission and Congress in late 2004.

"There are issues with representation from different states, different initiatives. ... You want to have a good diversity of statues," Fontana said, and later added when asked about the new legislation: "An additional 50 statues would certainly require new planning."